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THEATER; Learning the Moves of Harlem, Circa 1930

By BARRY SINGER

THE lore of the rent party looms large in the legend of Harlem. Appropriately, it takes over the spotlight at one point in "Harlem Song," the musical revue at the Apollo Theater that traces the history of the neighborhood.

Depression-era Harlemites pushed back the furniture and made their rent money by inviting the neighborhood in to eat, drink and dance, for a price. "But rent parties also had a social purpose," said George C. Wolfe, who wrote and directed the show, which opened earlier this month. "They were not merely economic occasions. Rent parties gave that great wave of migration from the South then pouring into Harlem a chance to Harlemize."

It is this acclimatizing function (and "Saturday night functions" are how Harlem residents referred to rent parties) that Mr. Wolfe has captured in "Miss Linda Brown," a jiving song and dance number ingeniously choreographed by Ken Roberson as a virtual catalog of Lindy steps and other swing dance specialties. In his review in The New York Times, in which he described "Harlem Song" as "an adrenaline-laced valentine to a neighborhood," Ben Brantley called the number "the show's emotional center and most memorable moment."

The performers who ignite it -- DanaShavonne Rainey, 23, and Gabriel A. Croom, 26 -- acknowledge that the era is new to them. "There's so much about Harlem history I didn't know," Mr. Croom confessed over coffee recently in the company of Ms. Rainey, who nodded in agreement.

Ms. Rainey added: "We've been challenged to try and be authentic. I couldn't be Dana circa 2002. So I started studying pictures and films. What were people's postures like? How did they move?"

The music for their scene, an eccentric rural blues from the 1930's by Alvis Cowens, was unearthed by Mr. Wolfe in the vaults of Sony Records. "That song really helped us feel the characters," Mr. Croom said.

For Mr. Croom, who was born in Buffalo and has a bachelor's degree in musical theater from the State University of New York at Fredonia, this is not an entirely new experience. "I had done some swing dancing in other shows," he said, "and I've gone to the Manhattan dance club Swing 46 on occasion, to Lindy."

For Ms. Rainey, who arrived in New York 10 months ago, following some time in Europe but still fresh from her hometown of Cincinnati, the Lindy was entirely new. "It was really humbling," she said. "I felt like a little kid learning how to walk."

Ms. Rainey, who graduated from Hollins University in Roanoke, Va., with a bachelor's degree in dance, is one of only two cast members (out of 14) in "Harlem Song" who survived an open call to get the job. "I got to New York in October," she said, "and auditioned for the show in April. I saw the ad in Back Stage and thought, 'Why not?' I'd been to the Apollo once a long time ago, but I got kind of emotional this time walking on that stage -- 800 dancers and li'l ole me."

To hear Mr. Wolfe describe it, choosing Ms. Rainey was almost elemental. "I remember turning to Whoopi Goldberg" -- one of the producers of "Harlem Song" -- "and saying: 'See that girl dance? That's probably what Josephine Baker danced like. Can't move a finger without her whole body moving too. Complete abandon.' That's what I was after."

Ms. Rainey's dance with Mr. Croom wound up the hoofing equivalent of a jazz cutting contest, that ageless African-American ritual of can-you-top-this competitiveness updated by Mr. Wolfe and Savion Glover in their Broadway show "Bring In da Noise, Bring In da Funk." The cutting contest in "Harlem Song," though, had to be of its time.

"I'm the Geechee Gal and Gabe's the Bama Boy," Ms. Rainey explained, "fresh off the train and very country, I mean, real rubes, at this rent party. And all he wants to do is to get me dancing."

Mr. Croom laughed. "Which I do."

To Mr. Wolfe, their interaction has a revealing duality. "They pretend a sophistication, the surface of which they've learned, but they really don't possess," he said. "Harlem is in their language and dress but their Southernness is in their bodies. When they dance, who they really are comes out. The steps tell their story."

The sequence seems invented on the spot. Of course, it is anything but. "The coupling is very structured because of all the close partnering," Mr. Croom said. "When we're dancing around each other, though, it's pretty wide open. There's room for us to bring stuff in -- within the realm of reason."

Ms. Rainey offered an example. "I saw this old movie and there was this woman dancer in it, I don't know her name, but at one point she did something I thought was so wonderful -- this move where she kicked her leg way up, to the side, froze in midair and just sort of wiped her foot

off: 'Awww! Awww!' And I thought, 'Yeah, I've got to take that and use it.' "

Mr. Croom smiled. "She surprised me with that leg thing. And it boosted my energy level. I thought: 'Oh, yeah?' "

Ms. Rainey smiled too. "He's also surprised me. There are certain moments when I say to myself: 'I see. You bein' for real!' And it does give you that edge. 'All right,' you think. 'I'll outdo you!' "

Harlem Song

Apollo Theater, 253 West 125th Street, Harlem.